Cockroach

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Contents

The Faculty of Thought.....1
The Meanings of Others.....4
Possession.....8
The Calm.....13

The Faculty of Thought

Beneath the stove, in the dark seam between the tiles and the iron, something stirred. The cockroach awoke not because it chose to, but because the world moved — the pipe hissed, a match struck, the air warmed. Above, two humans were arguing over bread. Their voices were sharp, echoing through the metal like thunder through a hollow shell.

He watched them from the crack — one tearing the loaf, the other accusing, both faces red with the same hunger. They clutched the crust as though life itself had been baked into it. "It's mine!" the man shouted. "No, it's mine!" the woman retorted. To them, it was theirs. To him, it was nothing.

He thought, "The bread is an outer thing. The hands that fight over it are outer things. Even the hunger that gnaws in their bellies belongs to the body, and the body belongs to the world. None of these things are mine."

A crumb fell to the floor. He climbed upon it, not as a thief, but as a witness. "The crumb is what it is. It neither belongs to them nor to me. It simply is." He chewed slowly, tasting dust more than flour, and thought further.

"The world did not make me master of bread or of men. It gave me only one domain — how I think about bread and men. If I think greed, I am their equal in slavery. If I think peace, I am free among them."

The quarrel ended. The woman took her half, the man his. Each muttered a curse and turned away, both sure the other had more. The cockroach, beneath them, was still. He had eaten less than a grain, yet he felt full. Not of bread — of understanding.

"Food is of the world. Possession is of the world. The body is of the world. But how I think — that is mine. The world governs the rest. I will not fight its order," he whispered to himself, though no one heard.

And in that moment, under the stove’s rusted belly, the smallest creature in the room held the calm of a sage.

When night came, the pipes above him carried voices again. Through the thin metal, the cockroach heard a woman speaking softly to herself — no longer quarrelling like the others, only murmuring words that broke between breaths.

He climbed from the stove and followed the sound through the narrow vent that wound between rooms. Warm dust brushed against his shell as he moved, and the air grew damp from the woman's tears before he even saw her.

She sat beside a window with a candle stub on the sill, counting coins — three, no more. Beside them lay a crust of bread, a worn shoe, and a faded photograph. Her shoulders trembled, and now and then she muttered, “I have nothing. Nothing left.”

The cockroach paused near the cracked plaster, unseen. He watched as she pressed her face into her hands, rocking back and forth, as though the motion could change the world.

"Nothing has touched her but her own meaning. The coins are what they are — metal circles without thought. The bread is what it is — food, not sorrow. Yet she thinks misery into them, and thus misery becomes her companion," he thought.

The candle flickered; wax dripped like small, molten tears. The cockroach reflected: "Misery does not come from what is, but from the meaning chosen about what is. The world offered her evening, silence, bread, and light. She called it poverty, and so it became so. Were she to call it enough, it would be enough."

He crept closer to the coins. They did not shine; they only reflected the candle’s dying flame. "The world gives no meaning to gold," he thought, "it is men who think it 'beautiful.' They kneel before the idea they made themselves."

When the candle went out, the woman continued to weep in darkness. The cockroach turned back through the vent. He felt no pity, only knowing. "She thinks 'I have nothing.' But no one lacks what the world never gave to own. The body, the bread, the coins — all outer things. She suffers not from want, but from thought."

And so, in the stillness behind the walls, he whispered his own prayer to the unseen order of things ",World, keep me poor of all but right thought."

Later that night, the cockroach crept through another crack in the wall and found a different sound — the hollow clinking of glass, the slow exhale of a man alone. The room smelled of alcohol and rust. A lamp burned low, casting a yellow circle upon the table. Within it sat the man, shirt open, eyes half-closed, swaying gently like a ship without anchor.

Before him stood a bottle, nearly empty, and a portrait turned face-down. Each time he poured, he muttered something too low to hear, as though bargaining with ghosts.

The cockroach lingered at the edge of the table leg, watching. The man drank, frowned, drank again, then stared into the glass as though waiting for it to answer.

"He tries to drown the world," thought the cockroach, "but the world does not fit into his bottle. He drinks only his own meaning — the thought that he must forget. He thinks pain into the liquid, and pain answers him back."

The man laughed suddenly, a sharp, cracked laugh that broke into coughing. He wiped his mouth and whispered, “To peace,” and then struck the table with his fist, spilling what remained. The cockroach stepped back as the drops fell near him, dark and sour.

"He does not seek peace," the cockroach reflected, "he seeks numbness. Peace is in the stillness of thought, not in the forgetting of it. To flee thought is to fall into deeper noise."

From the open window came the wind — cool, indifferent. The flame trembled. The man sat slumped, head bowed, hand hanging loose.

“He cannot drown the world,” the cockroach thought again, “he can only disturb his own mind, stirring the water of it until it turns to mud.”

The wind carried the smell of rain. The cockroach climbed up the wall toward the window’s edge, looked once more at the motionless man, and turned away.

“The world is calm,” he whispered. “It is only the drinker who shakes it.”

When the night had ripened and all quarrels fell silent, the cockroach wandered further through the building’s hollow veins. The pipes hummed softly, the air thick with warmth from sleeping bodies. He emerged through a thin crack and found himself in a child’s room.

The moonlight came through the window, silver and still. Toys were scattered on the floor — a wooden horse missing a leg, a tin soldier bent at the knee, a rag doll with one button eye. All broken, all quiet. And upon the bed lay the child, breathing evenly, face turned upward, a faint smile beneath the shadow of dreams.

The cockroach climbed onto the windowsill and watched. The child’s hand twitched now and then, as if reaching for something unseen. Yet no sorrow lived there, no hunger, no shame. The world, for this small being, was enough simply because it was.

“Here is peace,” the cockroach thought. “Not in silence, nor in wealth, but in the absence of false meaning. The child does not think the toy ‘broken,’ nor the room ‘poor.’ It only sees what is — and sleeps.”

He looked at the soldier’s dented helmet, the cracked paint on the wall, the tiny shoe beneath the bed. None of these things call themselves “ugly” or “beautiful.” They simply are. Only later will someone teach the child to admire, to despise, to compare.

The candlelight from the hall flickered through the keyhole, painting a trembling line across the floor. The cockroach reflected, “The calm of innocence is the calm of not yet admiring outer things. Before thought bends to illusion, it rests in harmony with the world.”

He bowed his head slightly — a gesture not of reverence but of acknowledgment — and whispered,
“May the child stay untroubled until meaning wakes within him. For once it wakes, it begins to hunger, and once it hungers, it forgets the peace of being.”

Then he retreated back to the vent, his small form disappearing into the quiet breath of the walls, while the child slept on, smiling at nothing, which is to say — at truth itself.

The cockroach returned to the kitchen before dawn. The air was still heavy with yesterday's smoke, but the quarrelling voices were gone. Only the steady whisper of the gas flame broke the quiet — a blue tongue flickering beneath the kettle, speaking in its low, even breath.

He settled near the flame, where warmth gathered on the stone. Around him, the room was a field of stillness. The spoon in the cup leaned against the rim like a weary soldier; a crumb of bread rested on the table, uneaten; the clock ticked not to remind, but to exist.

He felt the world moving — not with will, but by its own nature. The flame burned because it must, the pipe dripped because it must, the dawn would come because it must. None of it asked permission.

"The world governs itself," he thought. "I am not its ruler, nor its servant. I crawl, it turns. I live, it burns. Both are proper, both enough."

From beyond the window came the faint sound of footsteps — early workers crossing the courtyard, muttering about the cold. He listened without judgment. "They too follow the order of things," he thought, "though they believe it theirs to command."

He turned toward the flame, watching its tip tremble. "To know what is mine and what belongs to the world — this is the beginning of freedom. Mine is how I think of warmth; the warmth itself is not mine. If the flame dies, I may think peace about its dying, for the flame obeys the world, not me."

He remained there, motionless, until the first light entered the kitchen. The flame dimmed in the growing brightness, its color paling to nothing.

"So ends every fire," the cockroach thought, "not by injustice, but by order. I will remember this when my own light fades. The world will not mourn me, nor should it. It will go on, untroubled, as it should."

And with that, he slipped once more beneath the stove — small, silent, and free.

The Meanings of Others

Through the narrow tunnel of the ventilation shaft, the cockroach wandered again. Dust drifted around him like slow rain, and the smell of ink and paper grew stronger the deeper he went. Somewhere ahead, someone was speaking — not to another, but to himself.

He reached the end of the shaft and peered through a rusted grate into a small, cluttered room. Books lay open like wounded birds, their pages bent and stained. At the table sat a man with a cigarette trembling between his fingers, a sheet of paper before him, his brow wet with frustration.

"Garbage," the man muttered. "Every word — garbage." He tore the page in two, then three, and threw the pieces to the floor. The cockroach watched one of them drift under the desk,

landing beside a crumpled ball of the same. There were many such balls — a snowfield of discarded thought.

The poet struck the table. “Why can’t I write what I mean?” he said aloud, as if the walls owed him an answer.

The cockroach listened quietly. “The man thinks words can betray him,” he thought, “but words have no will. They are outer things — sounds of the air, marks on paper. They cannot please or disgrace anyone. It is only the meaning he gives them that wounds him.”

The poet lit another cigarette. Smoke coiled upward, twisting like a thought that would not settle. “Nothing fits,” he whispered. “Nothing says what I feel.”

“He wants the outer to speak his inner,” the cockroach thought. “But the outer never speaks. It only reflects the mind that looks upon it.”

A gust from the window turned one torn sheet across the floor. The cockroach climbed upon it. There were words scribbled in haste — truth, silence, hunger. The ink was smudged, as if even those meanings tried to escape their maker.

“He curses his own verses,” the cockroach thought, “yet it is not the paper that fails him — it is his wish to make the world say what only his thought can say. He is angry at the mirror for not being a voice.”

The man leaned back, exhaling smoke toward the ceiling. His eyes followed the curling shapes as though they were his lost ideas.

The cockroach turned away, whispering to himself as he vanished into the wall:
“Words do not harm. Only the meaning we build upon them cuts. A fool thinks he has been wounded by language, but the wound is always self-inflicted.”

The cockroach moved along the corridor pipe, following the echo of raised voices. They came from two neighboring apartments divided by nothing more than a thin wall and thicker pride. The air in the duct vibrated with human noise — sharp, tangled, relentless.

“You stole my bucket again, thief!” shouted one voice, cracked and furious.
“I? You filthy liar, you used it and left it outside!” the other replied.

A chair scraped. Feet stamped. The quarrel became a storm of words — insult upon insult, names and curses like stones flung through the air.

The cockroach crept closer to the vent that opened between their rooms. He saw one woman red with anger, clutching a towel like a weapon, and another, older and shaking, pointing her finger as if to strike with it.

He watched them for a while, unmoved. “Each speaks only her own meaning,” he thought. “Neither hears the other, for each voice is an echo in its own skull.”

The younger one shouted, “You’ll pay for this!” and slammed her fist against the doorframe.

The older answered, “The whole building knows what you are!” and slammed the door.

For a moment there was silence, then the sound of muttering — words spoken to themselves now, the battle continued within.

“Neither can think the other’s part,” the cockroach reflected. “Each builds a world within, and believes it to be shared. But a thought cannot cross between minds any more than I can live in two cracks at once. What each human thinks, each human owns alone.”

He crawled higher along the wall, feeling the vibration of their anger fade. “They think they fight over a bucket,” he mused, “but they fight over meanings — and meanings have no handles to pull. Each holds only her own, shouting into the void between them.”

When all was quiet again, he paused and listened. Beyond the walls, the city breathed indifferently. No bucket, no insult, no echo mattered.

“The world hears none of their words,” he thought. “It lets them think their meanings and exhaust themselves. To know this is peace. To demand that another share your thought — that is slavery of the mind.”

And with that, he disappeared deeper into the pipe, leaving the humans to their private storms.

Through the narrow duct the cockroach crawled, following the muffled rhythm of laughter and movement. The air was heavy with perfume and heat, and he knew this was the apartment where two lived together — the couple who filled the nights with noise both tender and cruel.

He peered through the grate and saw them on the couch, arms wrapped around each other, whispering words that tried to sound eternal. Their faces were close, their eyes half-closed, as if they had found a secret the rest of the world had lost.

But before long the laughter shifted. A question, a tone, a glance — and the air turned sharp.

“Who was she?” the woman demanded.
“No one,” said the man, his voice already tired.
“You lie,” she hissed. “You always lie.”

Their hands that had just held began to push. The couch trembled under their movements. Tears, then shouts. The man reached for his coat; the woman tore it from him. In a single heartbeat love had become war.

The cockroach remained still, watching the pendulum swing between embrace and fury. “Love and hate are one thing,” he thought, “the wish to think outer as one’s own. Each believes the other belongs to them, as though the world had promised such possession. But nothing outer can be owned, not body, not word, not gaze.”

The man slammed the door, leaving her in silence. She sank to the floor, trembling. “He was mine,” she whispered into her hands.

The cockroach crept nearer. “No, he was the world’s,” he thought. “And you are the world’s too. You both try to make each other yours, and in that false claim you create your grief. The world gives companionship, not ownership. To call another ‘mine’ is already to lose them.”

Outside, footsteps faded down the stairwell. Inside, sobs filled the room like rain filling a cracked vessel.

The cockroach turned back toward the vent. “Attachment is the seed of pain,” he thought. “To desire the outer as one’s own is to hand one’s peace to chance. Whether the hand holds or lets go, both are moved by the same illusion.”

He slipped into the dark shaft once more. Behind him, the woman’s cries softened to whispers — not of love, but of loss. And the cockroach, climbing upward, thought quietly: “The world does not know such words. It gives and takes without meaning either. Only humans name it love when they cling, and hate when it slips away.”

The corridor above the basement was quiet, thick with the scent of metal and decay. The cockroach crept along the edge of a pipe and stopped when he heard a faint rustling, followed by a small, broken gasp. He turned toward the sound and saw a trap — its metal jaws closed, its purpose fulfilled. Inside, a mouse still moved, trembling, its sides rising and falling in shallow rhythm.

The cockroach approached slowly. The mouse’s eyes flickered, its paws weakly pressing against the wire. Around it lay a few crumbs that had lured it there, the promise of plenty that became the price of life.

“This is how the world feeds itself,” thought the cockroach. “Not in cruelty, but in order. Each thing serves what follows it. The trap is not evil; the hunger was not good; both are the same movement — the world turning itself.”

He climbed onto the wooden edge and looked closer at the dying creature. The mouse’s breath was now slow, its body jerking less. The cockroach felt no pity, only recognition. “Death is the world’s, not ours. The body belongs to the world, and the world reclaims what it lent.”

The mouse gave one last twitch and became still. The air settled.

“So it ends,” the cockroach reflected, “as every flame ends, as every breath ends. The world loses nothing; only the thought that called it ‘mine’ feels loss. The wise do not grieve what never belonged to them.”

He sat for a long while beside the trap, watching the faint sway of the wire in the draft. “Calmness is to think one’s meaning rightly in death. Not to call it ‘bad,’ nor ‘unjust,’ nor even ‘sad,’ but to think: it is. That is enough.”

He turned away at last, climbing the wall again. Behind him, the trap waited to be emptied, silent, fulfilled in its purpose.

“If the world takes me next,” he thought, “let it take me as easily. For the world governs the end as it governs the beginning. I will not think against it.”

He left the basement’s damp air and climbed upward, following the rhythm of the building’s breath — pipes murmuring, floorboards creaking, wind seeping through the old plaster. At last he found a narrow crack behind a picture frame on the third floor, a place untouched by broom or gaze.

From there he could see the edge of a room: a faded carpet, a table with a lamp, the corner of a mirror reflecting a part of the world he would never need to enter. The air was warm, still, enough for rest.

He folded his legs beneath him and listened. The building spoke in small sounds — sighs, whispers, shifting weight — as if it too were thinking.

“Here I am,” he thought, “between walls that are not mine, in a world that is not mine, yet at peace. What belongs to me? Only this: how I think.”

He looked upon the dust drifting in the beam of light that leaked from the lamp. Each mote spun gently, without purpose, yet perfectly. “They do not worry about where to fall,” he thought. “They follow the air. And I, too, follow what carries me.”

Outside, someone sneezed. A chair scraped. A clock struck one — then the silence returned, deeper for the sound that had passed.

“I am beside myself,” he thought, “not with fear, but with thought. The body crawls, the mind observes, and consciousness watches both. I attend only to how I think, for nothing else was given into my care.”

He felt the calm settle within him, that pure and weightless calm that comes when nothing more must be said, nothing more must be owned.

The picture frame above him hung slightly crooked, its image showing a landscape of trees and distant hills. The cockroach could not see it fully, yet he sensed its stillness — a frozen moment of the world pretending to last.

He smiled inwardly, though he had no mouth for smiling, and whispered:
“The picture does not know it hangs. The wall does not know it holds. The body does not know it lives. But I — I know that I think. And this, alone, is mine.”

Possession

Through a gap in the upper vent, the cockroach entered a room unlike any he had seen before. The air was heavy with polish and perfume. Rugs softened the sound of his steps; light glimmered on crystal and brass. Even the dust here seemed hesitant to settle, as though unworthy.

At the desk sat a man in a silk shirt, sleeves rolled, fingers smudged with the color of coins. Before him lay neat stacks of money — not for use, but for counting. He lifted each note as if it were sacred, smoothing its edges, murmuring numbers that meant everything to him and nothing to the world.

The cockroach climbed along the wainscot and watched. The man's eyes flickered with a feverish shine; now and then he smiled, now and then frowned, as if each counted bill breathed with its own will.

"Here is worship," the cockroach thought. "No idols of stone or sky — only paper, ink, and thought. The one who admires gold gives himself away as a slave. The chain does not circle his neck but his mind."

The man paused, sighing in pleasure, then added the total again, just to be sure. "Safe," he whispered. "Safe at last." Then, almost immediately, he began to count once more — proof that safety never follows possession.

"He builds a fortress of illusions," thought the cockroach, "but its walls are thinner than my shell. Every number he counts binds him tighter. What he calls 'mine' is the world's; what he calls 'safe' is chance disguised as order."

A draft from the window fluttered one note from the pile. The man lunged for it, catching it before it touched the floor. He held it to his chest as though it were a living thing saved from death.

"See how he trembles," the cockroach mused. "He fears loss more than death, for he thinks both are different. Yet loss and death are the same: the world reclaiming what was never his."

The man leaned back, exhausted, eyes hollow from his vigil. The clock struck four; dawn crept faintly through the curtains. Still, he guarded his treasure, unwilling to sleep lest the world move without him.

The cockroach descended quietly toward the baseboard, whispering to himself:
"He thinks he owns the gold, but the gold owns him. He guards it, serves it, dreams by its measure. I, who own nothing, sleep free beneath his feet."

When the cockroach left the rich man's room, he followed the faint scent of perfume to the next apartment. The walls here gleamed; not from wealth, but from constant wiping — the devotion of someone who feared dust more than age.

In the center of the room stood a woman before a tall mirror. The lamp's glow surrounded her like a stage light, and she leaned closer, tracing every line of her face as though it were a foreign script. A cloth in one hand, she polished the glass with small, precise circles.

The cockroach hid behind the curtain hem and watched.

The woman whispered to her reflection, “You’re still beautiful. You’re still… yes, beautiful.” But her voice trembled on the word, as though the mirror might argue.

She wiped harder, inspecting each streak, each imperfection. The mirror shone back not truth, but her hunger for it.

“Appearance does not say ‘beautiful’,” the cockroach thought. “It does not even know it appears. It is only a body — a shape of the world. The thought that calls it ‘beautiful’ is the true painter of the image.”

She leaned even closer, touching her cheek, her lips, her neck. Her eyes shifted between pride and despair, between ‘still’ and ‘no longer.’

“She seeks meaning in the reflection,” the cockroach reflected, “as if glass could confirm what she cannot think with peace. Yet beauty lives nowhere but in the thought that names it. The mirror shows nothing but the world’s clay.”

A strand of her hair fell loose; she brushed it back sharply, annoyed by its disobedience. Then, sighing, she dabbed perfume at her throat, staring one last time before turning away — not satisfied, only tired.

When she left, the room grew quiet again. The cockroach climbed up the wall and looked into the mirror himself. What he saw was a dark speck upon the glass — small, rough, unnoticed.

“The mirror does not say ‘ugly’ either,” he thought. “It has no speech. The judgment is always ours. To think ‘beautiful’ or ‘ugly’ — both are inventions. The body is silent; the thought is loud.”

He turned from the glass and descended back into shadow, whispering as he went:
“Only those who believe the mirror speak are slaves to it. The world reflects nothing but itself; it is we who give it names.”

Toward evening, the building awoke again with human noise. Through the vents, the cockroach followed a wave of voices that rose and broke like a quarrelsome sea. He reached a parlor where three people sat around a table — two men and a woman, each with papers before them, their faces hard as stone.

“This house is mine by right,” said the eldest, his fist striking the wood.
“Yours?” laughed the younger. “You did nothing but wait for him to die.”
The woman, pale and trembling, clutched the document to her chest. “He promised it to me. He said it with his own mouth!”

The air thickened with greed. Every word was a knife dulled by repetition. The cockroach watched from a crack in the wainscot, seeing not a family but a circle of prisoners, each chained to the same word.

“‘Mine,’” he thought, “the smallest word with the heaviest chain. Whoever says ‘mine’ is already punished by fear of loss. The moment they name a thing their own, they imagine its theft, its ruin, its end.”

The youngest brother stood and shouted, “Then take it all! Take the house, the furniture, his name — may it choke you!”

“Better that than starve while you drink it away!” the other replied.

The cockroach turned his gaze to the documents on the table — pages of lines and stamps, human symbols for ownership. “They think these marks bind the world to them,” he mused, “but the world cannot be written upon. The ink fades, the paper burns, the house itself crumbles. Still they cling to ashes, calling them theirs.”

One of them began to weep, not from guilt but exhaustion. The quarrel softened into murmurs, then silence. They looked at the papers without seeing them.

“They fear to lose what they never had,” the cockroach thought. “The house belongs to the world; it always did. The one who lives within it merely borrows its shelter, as I borrow the crack in this wall. When I leave, it remains — untroubled, ownerless.”

He descended into the baseboard’s dark as the last voice said bitterly, “He left us nothing.”

“He left you everything,” thought the cockroach. “The lesson of loss — the truth that frees. Yet none of you will see it, for you call it injustice instead of deliverance.”

The lights dimmed; the quarrel died. In the quiet that followed, only the ticking clock dared to speak, reminding the room that all things, even ownership, belong to time.

Night had deepened again, and through the heating duct came the dry crackle of fire. The cockroach followed its scent — paper and smoke, sharp and human. He emerged onto the edge of a mantelpiece, unseen, where a man sat before a small metal bin, feeding it with letters.

One by one, the envelopes flared, curled, and vanished into drifting ash. The man’s face was calm but strained, lit from below by the orange glow. Now and then, he read a line before letting it go. His lips moved silently, repeating names, places, words once alive.

The cockroach crept closer, drawn by the strange rhythm of destruction — a ceremony of farewell disguised as cleanliness.

The man whispered, “Enough… enough now,” yet still added another letter, another, as if the fire might finally erase something beyond its reach.

“He burns paper,” the cockroach thought, “but not the meaning he gave to it. Flames devour ink, not memory. Memory is not outer; it lives only in the thought that keeps it.”

The man lifted a photograph, stared at it long, then dropped it into the blaze. It blackened slowly, the faces melting into smoke. He exhaled, and his breath mingled with the rising cinders.

“He thinks he frees himself by destroying what he can touch,” mused the cockroach. “But the outer is innocent; it holds no pain. What torments him is within — his own chosen meanings about what was.”

The last letter slipped from the man’s fingers. The fire dimmed, reduced to soft red coals. He sat back, empty-handed, waiting for silence to erase him as it had the paper.

“He thinks the past is burned,” the cockroach reflected, “but the past does not burn. It does not even exist. Only his thought about it remains, and that is his alone to keep or let go.”

The man turned off the lamp and left. The room filled with the faint scent of ash and peace. The cockroach climbed to the rim of the bin and looked down at the gray remains — weightless, almost nothing.

He whispered into the still air:
“Nothing outer holds the past. The ashes are only ashes. The meaning that lived in them is still alive — until one chooses to think otherwise.”

When the fire’s glow had faded into darkness, the cockroach turned back toward the vent. The air that once carried warmth now blew cold, heavy with the scent of burned paper and human sighs. He crawled through the narrow passage until it rose upward, a long metal throat that led to the roof.

The climb was steep, but he moved steadily, drawn by the faint hum of the city above — the whisper of wind and distance. When he emerged, the world opened around him: rooftops glistening with frost, chimneys breathing white, the sky vast and indifferent.

He paused at the edge, the wind pressing against his shell. Below, the building slept, unaware of its quiet philosopher. Lights flickered in distant windows like small, stubborn hearts still clinging to warmth.

He gazed upon it all — the houses, the streets, the silent web of lives that glittered and faded. “So many hands holding what they believe to be theirs,” he thought. “Yet everything they clutch already belongs to the world.”

He felt the frost gather beneath his feet but did not move. “Nothing is lost to one who never thought he owned anything. The world takes and gives by its own measure; only the possessive mind invents loss.”

The wind grew stronger. He bowed his head against it, watching it sweep a paper scrap from the roof’s edge. It lifted, twirled, and vanished into the dark — free because it had no keeper.

“The wise live as the wind lives,” he thought. “They keep nothing, not even themselves. What passes through them leaves no wound.”

The city stretched endless beneath the stars. Somewhere below, a door closed, a child stirred, a man dreamed of gold. Above them all, the cockroach sat small and unmoving, warmed by thought alone.

“The one who owns nothing is never poor,” he reflected. “The one who holds nothing cannot be robbed. The world is whole, and I — unnoticed, unneeded — am at peace within it.”

He turned back toward the vent, descending again into the quiet belly of the building, carrying with him the only possession worth keeping — the calm of right thought.

The Calm

It began with a strange smell — sharp, foreign, crawling through every crack like a warning. The cockroach stirred from his rest behind the radiator and felt the air shift. A heavy mist rolled under doors and through pipes, thick and bitter. Humans shouted, chairs scraped, windows opened.

Within moments the building became chaos. Doors slammed, feet pounded down the stairwell, voices cried out, “Gas! They’re fumigating!”

The cockroach knew this scent. It was the world’s command, spoken in the language of survival. He moved quickly into the wall, climbing toward the upper vents while the humans fled below.

From his passage he watched them — carrying children, shouting names, coughing as they went. The rooms they called their own were left open, full of furniture, mirrors, and crumbs. They ran from death but left behind their lives.

“The wise are always hunted by fools,” he thought, “and fools are those who hate what they cannot own. These humans have tried to own even the air — and now the air itself turns against them.”

He reached a higher duct and paused, the gas thick behind him, the open roof vent above.

“They wage war on what they fear,” he reflected, “not knowing that the world obeys only itself. They call it cleansing; I call it order.”

The cockroach crawled out through the vent and onto the cold edge of the roof. The fog poured from the pipes below, a gray sea swallowing the building. He could hear the humans still shouting in the distance, their voices echoing like broken horns.

He looked down upon it all, unafraid. “They would destroy what they cannot master,” he thought. “They kill the small because the small remind them of truth — that nothing truly belongs to them.”

He watched the mist rise higher, soft and silent, and whispered:
“Let them flee. Let them cleanse. The world does not hate me; it simply reclaims what was always its. The fool hates the mirror that shows his chains. The wise — he only sees the chains fall away.”

He crawled back inside, into a narrow pipe that hummed faintly with the flow of escaping air. The gas had not reached this far yet — the metal walls were cool and dry, his small refuge within the storm. Above, he heard the chaos continue: footsteps thundering, shouts blurring into the crackle of panic, glass breaking, doors slamming.

From every room came the same cry, voiced in different tones — fear.

The cockroach waited, still as ash, listening. “So this is what humans call danger,” he thought. “The world shifts as it must, and they tremble, believing the change is against them.”

A child screamed somewhere above. Someone coughed violently. Another voice shouted orders no one followed. The noise rose and fell like waves — a chorus of minds trying to command the uncommandable.

“Fear belongs to those who think outer things can harm them,” he reflected. “But nothing outer reaches what is truly ours. The body may fall, the breath may stop, yet thought — if kept right — remains untouched until the end. The wise know this; the rest run from wind and shadow.”

He felt the pipe vibrate as something heavy fell nearby — perhaps a table overturned, perhaps a person collapsing. It did not matter. “What falls, falls by the world’s rule,” he thought. “I can only choose how I think about it.”

He closed his eyes — or rather, withdrew into stillness, the way only small creatures can. Above, the chaos began to fade. The shouts turned to murmurs, the footsteps to distant echoes.

“They will say the air tried to kill them,” he mused. “But the air simply was. It carried no hatred, no purpose. Their fear filled it with meaning, and thus they suffered their own invention.”

A gust passed through the pipe, stirring a grain of dust beside him. He watched it swirl and settle again. “If I move, it is because I must. If I die, it is because the world has use for my death. In neither case am I wronged.”

He listened a while longer until the building above fell silent. Then, quietly, he whispered to the emptiness around him:
“Only those who worship the outer can be wounded by it. The rest live free — even here, where fear cannot breathe.”

When the air began to clear, the cockroach crept upward again. The pipes were cold and wet, humming faintly with the retreat of the gas. He moved slowly, tasting the stillness through his feelers, until he reached an open crack in the wall and stepped out into the hallway.

Everything was silent. The building that once pulsed with quarrels, laughter, coughing, and footsteps now stood hollow. The floors were damp where the mist had settled, and the doors hung ajar like mouths left open mid-sentence.

He walked beneath the coats still hanging on the pegs, past a kettle that had boiled itself dry, past a chair fallen on its side. A broken toy lay near the stair — its painted face staring upward, expression fixed, eternal.

He paused and listened. No voices. No movement. The world had exhaled, and all sound had gone with the breath.

“So this is what remains when meanings flee,” he thought. “Objects without owners, rooms without stories. The world neither mourns nor rejoices; it simply is.”

He climbed onto the step of the stairwell and looked through the window at the courtyard below. The wind moved the leaves; the smoke rose and vanished; the sun glimmered faintly through the fading haze.

“The world keeps no record of what passed here,” he mused. “It does not care who stayed or fled, who cursed or prayed. Only humans think memory into the air. The air itself forgets at once.”

He continued along the railing, his small claws clicking against the iron. Each sound fell into the emptiness and returned to him unchanged — as if the building now echoed only itself.

“There is peace in this silence,” he thought, “for nothing seeks meaning here. The world has returned to its nature — indifferent, complete.”

He stopped by a single window left open. A faint breeze stirred the curtains, and dust floated like pale smoke in the sunlight.

He whispered to the emptiness:
“The world endures, untouched by what we call tragedy or triumph. Only the mind invents mourning and joy. When the mind is quiet, the world reveals its true face — still, untroubled, whole.”

The cockroach climbed through the open window and onto the outer ledge. The night had returned, cool and vast, wrapping the city in quiet. From the height of the building, he saw the roofs spread out like islands in a black sea, and beyond them, countless windows glowing faintly — small fires, each alive with its own thought.

He moved to the edge where the wind met him head-on. Below, the streets were nearly empty. Now and then a car passed, or a human shape crossed between lamps, swallowed by the dark again.

“Each light below is a thought thinking itself ‘alone,’” he mused. “Every window hides a mind, folded into itself, believing it is separate from the others. They call this feeling loneliness, as if the world had abandoned them.”

He watched a curtain shift in one of the windows. Someone moved there — maybe praying, maybe reading, maybe weeping. It made no difference. The light glowed, then dimmed. Another shone brighter.

“The world does not think loneliness,” he reflected. “It knows no division between one light and another. It burns them, extinguishes them, rekindles them — not as separate, but as one unbroken fire that never asks who watches whom.”

The wind pressed harder, tugging at his small limbs. He held fast to the rough brick, feeling the pulse of the city beneath him — steady, vast, indifferent.

“They believe themselves divided by walls, by bodies, by fear,” he thought. “Yet their breath rises into the same air, their warmth fades into the same cold. Even their sorrow joins the same silence.”

He turned his gaze toward the horizon, where the city ended and darkness began — that endless field where no lights glimmered, no windows burned.

“This is what the world knows,” he whispered. “Not the chatter of ‘I’ and ‘you,’ but the quiet whole where no thought is alone, for none are separate to begin with.”

The wind swept a speck of dust from the ledge and carried it away. The cockroach followed it with his eyes until it vanished into the dark — not lost, only unseen.

The wind grew colder as the hour thinned toward dawn. Beneath the paling stars, the cockroach turned away from the ledge and made his way back toward the window. The city below was fading into mist again — not dying, only resting between breaths.

He climbed through the frame and descended the wall until he found a narrow crack between bricks, warm from the day’s remaining heat. It was small, dark, and perfectly enough.

He entered it and settled there. Around him, the building murmured in its sleep — pipes sighing, wood shrinking, distant echoes of a world still turning by its own law. He felt no fear, no pride, no need to crawl further.

“This is all the Cosmos gave me,” he thought. “Not possessions, not safety, not even lasting breath — only the power to think rightly. All else belongs to the world.”

He listened to the silence that followed the thought. It was deep and unbroken, a silence not of absence but of truth — the sound of nothing demanding to be more.

“If I can think rightly, I can live rightly,” he continued. “If I can live rightly, I am free — though I own nothing, though I am nothing in the eyes of men.”

From outside came the first grey of morning. Light entered the crack like a thin blade, not to wound but to bless. Dust stirred in its path, turning briefly to gold before fading again.

“Freedom is not to escape the world,” he reflected, “but to see that nothing was ever mine to lose. The world acts, I respond. The world takes, I assent. Thus, no harm can reach me.”

He folded his limbs beneath him, his mind clear as the sky beyond the walls. The flame, the quarrels, the hunger, the noise — all had passed through him like shadows through light.

“The Cosmos is vast, indifferent, and perfect,” he whispered to himself. “It owes nothing. I ask nothing. I am free.”

And with that, he grew still, becoming part of the wall’s breath, another quiet pulse in the endless calm of the world.